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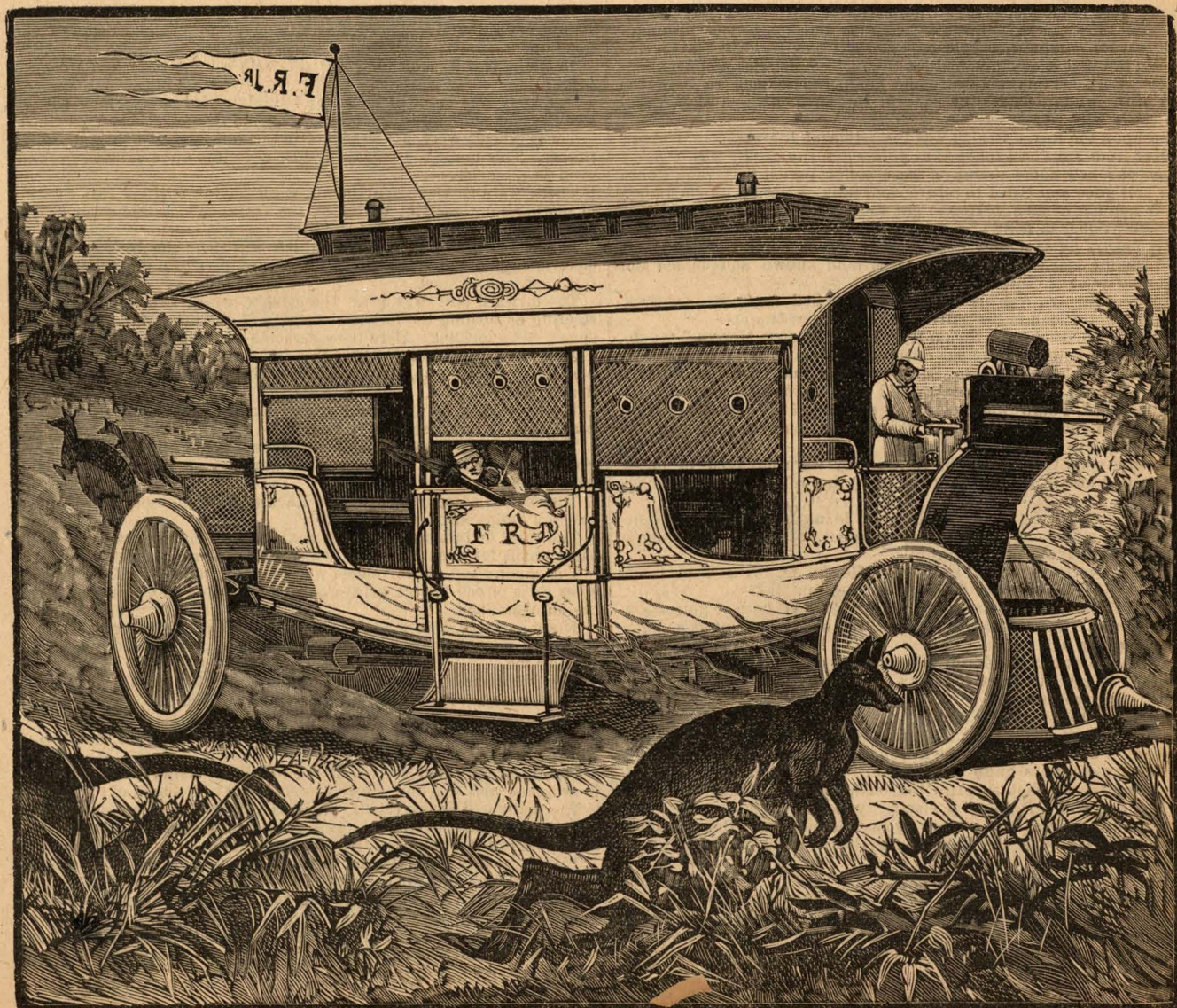
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Vol. III

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Frank Reade, Jr.'s Electric Buckboard; or, Thrilling Adventures in North Australia.

By "NONAME."



Frank Reade, Jr.'s Electric Buckboard;

OR,

THRILLING ADVENTURES IN NORTH AUSTRALIA.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., and His Electric Cruiser of the Lakes," "Frank Reade, Jr., and His Electric Prairie Schooner," "From Zone to Zone," "The Black Range," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE ELECTRIC BUCKBOARD.

SOUTH of the island of Timor in the Indian Ocean and very nearly upon the parallel of 12 deg. south latitude, a ship was plowing its way through a tossing sea.

Smoke circled from her funnels and rising high in the air seemed to blend with the low lying clouds in one continuous bank of white.

Upon her decks stood a number of passengers on their way to North Australia, the ship intending to touch at the port of Keats, just below Cape Hay.

For many years numerous projects have been established to explore Arnhem Land as the north of Australia is called.

It was a wild and desolate country filled with pitfalls and traps for the unwary traveler.

There were found the savage wild beasts of the tropics, the deadly reptiles of the swamps, and the treacherous and murderous bushman.

There were reputed rich gold mines in Arnhem Land, fields so rich with the ore that it could be had for the turning up with a shovel.

This report led many unwary and venturesome men to dare the perils of the wilderness for the sake of the fortune which they hoped to so easily win.

And upon the Raven, which was the name of the steamship which ran over from Java and touched at points on the coast, was a party of men who had come to brave these awful perils, to invade where many had gone and failed to return, and fully explore Arnhem Land.

They had not come unprepared nor were they men who were not thoroughly equal to their undertaking.

Only four in number they were, three white men and a negro.

The leading spirit of the party was a man known and famed the world over as an inventor.

Frank Reade, Jr., was his name and he hailed from Readestown, U. S. A. Not a man in his native land was more famous.

As the inventor of the "Steam Man," the "Electric Horses," "Submarine Boat" and other famous creations he was justly celebrated.

His three companions were Barney O'Shea, an Irishman, Stanley Martin, a plucky young American, and Pomp, a faithful negro.

Barney and Pomp were trusty servants of Frank Reade, Jr. Martin was a young Yale student who was anxious to gain information in extensive travel.

Standing upon the deck of the Raven they were engaged in eager conversation and in watching for the coast line of the Australian continent.

"We ought to sight Cape Van Diemen in an hour," declared Captain Benton, who came along at this moment, "but for this choppy sea we would have seen it before this."

"That is welcome news!" said Frank Reade, Jr. with a pleasant laugh. "We shall be glad to reach our destination!"

"Amen!" chimed in Stanley Martin. "It has been expectation long deferred. But I presume we shall see wonderful things enough to richly repay us!"

"There are many wonderful things in Australia!" declared Capt. Benton, "as you will learn after you have been there awhile. I hope you will enjoy yourselves!"

"We hope so!" replied Frank.

"I am anxious to see that Electric Buckboard of yours once put together. I am sure it must be a wonderful sight!"

"The Buckboard is quite a machine!" declared Frank. "I feel quite sure that we shall surprise the bushmen not a little."

"That you will. It goes by electricity you say?"

"It's motive power is furnished by electric engines. But you shall see and enjoy a ride in the Electric Buckboard when we once reach shore."

"I can assure you I shall be delighted!"

Then the captain moved away to another part of the ship.

The Electric Buckboard was Frank Reade, Jr.'s latest and greatest invention. For a long time the young explorer had kept in mind a trip to North Australia, and the Buckboard was specially designed for such a thing.

At the first thought one would wonder not a little how an electric buckboard could be constructed.

The buckboard proper is known to be a wagon without springs, yet of such length of body that one's weight depending upon a single pliable board is carried without the least jar. It is much used in mountainous regions of the United States.

Frank knew that Arnhem Land was in a large part mountainous.

The machine he must devise to traverse that land with then must be of a proper sort to ride smoothly over rough land.

The ordinary springs would admit of such jolting that the delicate electric engines would stand a good show to get out of order very soon.

So Frank devised the Buckboard. And before going further in our story, let us take a look at the machine.

As it stood completed in the yard of the extensive machine shops at Readestown the Buckboard was a thing of beauty and perfection to gaze upon.

In shape it was long and narrow, with a light body and a canopy top.

The body was made of tough and thinly rolled steel; four wheels, two in front and two in the rear, supported it.

These wheels were possessed of broad and grooved tires of tough rubber. This made the vehicle almost noiseless upon smooth ground, even as a bicycle.

There were three compartments, each having a broad seat capable of seating four people; therefore, the Buckboard could carry twelve passengers.

In the forward compartment, which was near the dasher, was the electric engine and dynamos. These were carefully protected by extra partitions of steel.

The forward seat was near the dasher, where two wheels, one for steering or turning the forward truck, and the other for shutting off speed, were located. Here the steersman and engineer remained.

And here, protruding through a loophole in the dasher, was an electric dynamite gun, the invention of Frank Reade, Jr., and truly a deadly weapon.

It was worked by pneumatic pressure and could throw a dynamite projectile the distance of fully a mile.

This projectile which exploded by impact could blow a hole in the ground deep enough to bury half a hundred men. It was truly a deadly weapon.

The second compartment of the Buckboard contained stores, weapons and ammunition.

The third or last compartment contained an electric stove and all the utensils for cooking, all of which was in charge of Pomp.

The canopy top of the vehicle was of steel, bullet proof. Upon all sides were lateen like curtains made to roll up or let down as the occasion demanded.

These curtains were made of plates of steel and when rolled down, loopholes were displayed, through which shots could be fired at an attacking foe.

The Buckboard had been especially designed for traveling in an enemy's country. The travelers could feel safe even in the presence of an army.

Thus was the exploring party equipped for the trip into the wilds of North Australia.

The Buckboard had been designed so that it could be taken apart in sections, and was now stowed safely away in the hold of the Raven.

The motive of Frank Reade, Jr., was simply that of adventure and research. Before leaving America great excitement had been created when news of the proposed trip was circulated.

This had led Stanley Martin, a plucky young Yale student, to apply to Frank Reade, Jr., for permission to accompany him.

At first Frank refused, but finding young Martin an agreeable companion, he had at length consented.

But before the party should be long in Australia they were destined to find a mission well worthy of their prowess. What this was succeeding events will show.

Every hour now the Raven drew nearer the Australian coast.

"Golly!" cried Pomp, who had been straining his gaze for a sight of the Australian continent, "dis chile jes' be glad fo' to set his foot on de lan' once mo'. I'se nebber gwine to fin' any mo' fault."

"Bejabbers, thac's well said, naygur!" cried Barney. "Yez have made to improve yer disposition jest a bit."

"Wha' am dat yo' say, lish?" spluttered the darky.

Both were warm friends, but delighted in nagging each other.

It was hard to say which one of them held the advantage in this respect. It was generally an even thing.

"Yez have grown deaf if yez didn't hear that!" retorted Barney.

"Shure do yez want me to repeat it?"

"If yo' does, I don't tak' de law in mah han's an' chastise yo' fo' 'sultin' a gemmen, sah!"

"Whurroo! Yez mane that? Shure av yez want a fall out av Barney O'Shea, there's no toime loike the prisint."

"Will yo' take back wha' yo' said, honey?"

"I niver take back anything!"

"Ki dar! Look out fo' yo'sef."

Down went Pomp's woolly head like a battering ram. He made a mad rush at Barney.

The Celt dodged, but his foot slipped and he did not get quite far enough out of the way.

The darky's head struck him in the hips. He was tilted into the air and down he went like a load of bricks with Pomp on top of him.

But Barney got a grapevine, and the two jokers rolled over and over upon the deck.

The result was most disastrous.

In their rolling they gained the cabin stairway.

Unfortunately one of the sailors had left a bucket of molten tar there.

It was liquid but not hot.

The two wrestlers went bang against it. The next moment they were covered with it. In trying to recover they went over the edge and down the stairs.

The bucket of tar went bumping after them. A ludicrous scene it was.

It was hard to tell which was the darky and which the white man.

The tar caused their clothing to adhere so firmly that it required several of the crew to pull them apart.

Everybody was convulsed with laughter but the captain, who was angry to think that the tar had been spilled upon his cabin stairs.

However, Frank Reade, Jr., punished the jokers by compelling them to clean up the tar from the stairs.

They had barely accomplished this when the lookout shouted:

"Land ho!"

CHAPTER II.

AT PORT OF KEATS.

It was an exciting cry. Instantly everybody was on deck. It was plain that the coast was in sight.

At once the crew began to make preparations for making port at Port Keats. The decks were made ship shape, and when the rugged promontory of Cape Hay was rounded everything was in order.

Keats could be seen at the lower end of a fine harbor.

There were a few small sailing vessels in sight. The town itself was a mere village, but romantically situated.

As the ship made the harbor a distant puff of smoke was seen and the report of a gun heard.

It was a salute from the small fort, and Captain Benton answered it by shaking out the Union Jack and answering with a small gun forward.

Then in the deep water of the harbor the Raven came to anchor.

Instantly the steamer was surrounded by a legion of boats from the heavy lighter for removing cargo down to the canoe of the native black trader.

It was a novel and foreign scene. For some while the Raven's passengers regarded it.

Then Captain Benton came up to Frank, and said:

"We will take your machine ashore now. There is a lighter alongside."

"Good!" cried Frank, joyfully. "That is the best of news!"

The various parts of the machine were placed aboard the heavy barge. A short while later they were taken ashore.

Then the travelers themselves prepared to leave the ship.

But at this juncture a small launch, flying the British flag, came alongside. Captain Benton saluted Frank, and said:

"I have an honor for you, sir!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank. "What may it be?"

"Gov. Archibald sends you his compliments and invites you to sojourn with him while in Keats."

Frank was overwhelmed. However, he managed to say:

"I am honored to accept the governor's very kind invitation, and I will be on hand as soon as possible."

The captain's gig took the distinguished travelers ashore. They were met by the governor himself, a short, stout ruddy faced Englishman.

A jovial host Gov. Archibald proved. He was delighted to welcome his visitors.

"Indeed I am glad to see you!" he declared. "You must know how welcome new-comers are in this remote part of the world."

The governor's "palace," as it was called, was quite a respectable bungalow, in a clump of trees, upon a prominent spot overlooking the harbor.

Here the party were given wine and a hearty dinner. Then Barney and Pomp went out to help about adjusting the Buckboard. But the governor detained Frank and Stanley Martin.

"Come into my audience-room!" he said. "I wish to see you upon a very important matter."

"Indeed!" said Frank. "Then you anticipated our coming?"

"Oh, yes. I received word some days ago by mail from London. With it came a very strange story, and a request from a gentleman there."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank in surprise. "What may it be?"

"I will tell you!"

They now entered a large room with rows of book shelves upon either hand, and the general appearance of a library.

"This is my audience chamber," said the governor, explanatively.

"People come from all parts of the Province with their requests and their grievances."

Archibald motioned Frank and Martin to take chairs.

Then he seated himself at his desk.

From an inner drawer he drew forth a bundle of papers. Among them was a photograph.

He held it up.

It was the likeness of the most beautiful young girl that the two travelers had ever seen as they believed. They gazed spellbound.

"By Jupiter! she's an angel!" cried Martin.

"Indeed she is beautiful!" declared Frank.

The governor nodded his head.

"I thought you would say that!" he declared, "but you will be horrified when I tell you her fate!"

"What?"

"This queen among women is at this moment a captive in the power of the most villainous band of bushmen in North Australia."

A cry of horror burst from the lips of the two listeners.

"A captive! Great Heaven, that is awful!" gasped Martin.

"How terrible!" exclaimed Frank.

"Yet it is true."

"But tell us how it happened? Who is she?" asked Martin.

"She is the daughter of Leonard Harcourt, of London, a very wealthy man. He came here a year ago for the purpose of investing a large capital in fruit raising. He purchased a farm of several thousand acres out here twenty miles at a place called Elfinland. It was a beautiful spot, and created by nature for the purpose."

"Well, Harcourt has made a success of his enterprise, and all has gone well until within a month. Just four weeks ago he awoke one night to find all his buildings on fire."

"Every effort was made to extinguish the flames, but in vain. That night Mabel Harcourt disappeared, and from that day to this all efforts to rescue her have been futile."

"Ontrageous!" exclaimed Martin, hotly. "It was the work of a villain."

"The bushmen?" asked Frank.

Archibald nodded his head.

"You have hit it, Mr. Reade!" he declared. "It was the work of the bushmen. Their leader, however, is not a black or a native of Australia, but a Frenchman named Leon Martel."

"Ah, but how do you even know that the young girl is alive? She may be dead," said Frank.

"No; we know better than that!" declared Gov. Archibald, "the purpose of the villain Martel was not a murderous one. He holds her captive."

"But what is his purpose?"

"He knows that Lenoard Harcourt is a very wealthy man and he seeks a ransom."

"A ransom?"

"Yes."

Frank and Martin looked at each other.

"For the sum of fifty thousand pounds," continued the governor, "he will restore Mabel to her distracted parent."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Frank. "And what does Mr. Harcourt say to this?"

"He is inclined to pay the ransom. He of course would give all in the world to recover his darling child. He has sent to London for the money."

"But he must never pay it! The young lady must and shall be rescued!"

"Do you mean that?" cried the governor, eagerly. "Ah, Mr. Reade, that is what I have wished to see you about. Can we depend upon your assistance?"

Frank extended his hand.

"I would be worse than a brute if I should refuse," he declared. "I am very glad as well to have the object in view. It will give spice to our exploring trip."

"You will have the undying gratitude of a sorrow-stricken father," declared the governor. "He will repay you well."

"But I may not succeed!"

"I feel sure that you will. With such a wonderful vehicle as your Electric Buckboard, you can stand your ground with the whole murderous gang. Oh, yes, you will succeed."

"I will try," said Frank, modestly.

Martin gripped his hand.

"I am glad you have espoused this noble cause, Frank," he said.

"You are! Why?"

"Because if you had not, I should have done so single handed."

"Oh, I am sure that you brave fellows will succeed!" cried Archi-

bald, with tears of joy in his eyes. "I shall pray for you. Be sure and bring Mabel Harcourt back to us safe and well."

"We will if we live!" cried Stanley Martin, fervidly.

"But don't forget that you have undertaken an arduous task. These bushmen are a peculiarly bad foe to handle. They can follow the trail of a spook, and they seemed to have the miraculous power of making themselves invisible at will."

"Fear not!" said Frank. "I have trailed the American Indian who is a master of strategy."

"But what if we do get killed!" cried Martin, heroically. "Life is well lost in the cause of so beautiful a lady!"

Just at that moment the door opened. A man of patrician appearance crossed the threshold.

He paused at sight of Frank and Martin.

"Friend Archibald, your pardon," he said, politely. "I was unaware that you were occupied."

"Harcourt!" cried the governor, joyously. "Just the man I wanted to see. Allow me to present to you two American gentlemen, Mr. Frank Reade, Jr., and Mr. Martin."

The Englishman looked surprised.

"What!" he exclaimed. "This is not the Mr. Reade you were telling me about a short while ago?"

"The same!" replied the governor.

"Not the owner of the famous Electric Buckboard which can travel anywhere at the will of the owner?"

"It is nobody else!"

The greeting was a warm one. At once Frank and Stanley were friends with Harcourt. The bereaved father told his story over and over again.

Frank and Martin of course expressed their sympathy and assured him of their co-operation.

"Have no fear, sir!" said Frank, confidently. "If your daughter is held for ransom no harm will be done her. We will be enabled to rescue her."

"You will win the undying gratitude of a sorrowing father!" declared Harcourt. "For Mabel is very dear to my heart."

"At least you may be assured of one thing," said Frank, earnestly. "We will do all we can to rescue her."

"I believe you. May God bless you!"

Gov. Archibald now produced some rich Australian wine. All partook of it, and then the governor said:

"I would like very much, Mr. Reade, to see your wonderful machine. Can you not show it to us?"

"With the utmost pleasure," declared Frank. "My men are now engaged in putting it together down on the wharf. If you will come with us I think I can show you something, the like of which you have not seen before."

"We shall be delighted."

The two men at once prepared to accompany Frank and Martin down to the wharf.

Quite a crowd of the townspeople had gathered there by this time. Barney and Pomp were busily at work constructing the Buckboard.

They were just adjusting the wheels as the party came up.

"Shure, Misther Frank, it will be all ready in tin minutes more," declared Barney. "Thin yez kin be after takin' a ride in it."

CHAPTER III.

THE WARNING.

BARNEY and Pomp had made quick work in putting the machine together. In ten minutes as Barney had said it was complete.

But of course the stores were not yet aboard nor the ammunition. Yet the electric engines were in order.

Frank stepped aboard and inspected these. Then he said to the Governor and Mr. Harcourt:

"Pray step aboard and I will show you over the machine."

The two men at once complied. Their wonderment was increased, as they saw the interior of the Buckboard.

They seated themselves upon the middle seat with Frank. Martin and Pomp sat in the rear, while Barney at the dasher handled the electric lever.

Barney switched on the current and the Buckboard glided from the wharf out into the street.

Its motion was as noiseless and graceful as could well be wished. Down the little street it moved.

"Well, this beats all!" cried Leonard Harcourt, in wonderment.

"Mr. Reade, you're the greatest genius on earth!"

"Not quite so bad as that," laughed Frank.

The buckboard was quickly out of the town. There was a little pass in the hills.

Through this it passed and came out upon a boundless plain. Here was a good stretch and Barney let the Buckboard out for a fast run. The machine could easily run forty miles an hour on smooth surface. It now shot ahead like a rocket.

The governor and Harcourt literally held onto their seats in terror.

"Whew!" exclaimed Archibald. "This suits me! I don't want to go any faster!"

"Is there not some risk, Mr. Reade?"

Frank laughed at this.

"I think not," he said. "By the way, Mr. Harcourt, did not you say your ranch was out this way somewhere?"

"There!" cried Harcourt, pointing to a distant rise of land. "Mercy on us! Have we come thus far in so short a space of time?"

"Oh, you have not seen the best speed of the machine yet. How far is your ranch from the town?"

"About twenty miles."

Frank consulted his watch.

"Well," he said, "we will visit your place and be back in time for dinner. You can then show me the ugly work of the bushmen."

"I shall be delighted; but mercy on us! we shall not be absent three hours from Keats if you keep your word."

"I shall do it."

"Why, we have always considered it a day's run out here. Eh, Archibald?"

"A fact," affirmed the governor.

"Ah, well, you are riding with Frank Reade, Jr., now," laughed Frank. "Hold on! here is a little pitch in the road."

The machine ran on at increased speed. Just where a shallow river took a wide sweep at the base of some hills was the ranch.

There were evidences yet of the fire and the battle with the bushmen.

But the Englishman had made good headway toward rebuilding the place.

Workmen were even now busy there.

A great herd of cattle was seen as the Buckboard rolled up to the stockade gate.

A number of rough-looking men were galloping about on diminutive ponies, something like our American mustangs.

The appearance of the Buckboard created a sensation, and all crowded about it.

But Frank was busy with the governor and Mr. Harcourt. They detailed to him in particular the attack of the bushmen and its result.

Frank listened attentively, and carefully noted all the important facts. This done, they returned to the Buckboard.

The run back to Keats was devoid of incident.

Frank kept his word and got the party there in time for the evening meal.

"In the morning," he declared, "we will set out for the stronghold of Black Leon."

"I would like to ask a favor," said Mr. Harcourt, eagerly.

Frank knew what it was before the Englishman spoke further, but he said:

"Well, sir, what is it?"

"That I may accompany you!"

Frank took the other's hand, and said:

"I am obliged to refuse that request. Really, Mr. Harcourt, it is much better and safer for you to stay at home. We will do all we can to rescue your daughter."

"I have no doubt of that, Mr. Reade. But I should like to go."

Frank would not yield.

Whereupon somewhat later Harcourt declared with a smile:

"You may see me in the bush country anyway. Be on the lookout."

"You will be very unwise to attempt such a thing," remonstrated Frank.

The matter dropped here. A royal dinner was indulged in at the governor's house.

Then an evening's entertainment was furnished, to which the travelers contributed very materially.

Pomp was an adept with the banjo, and Barney played the fiddle. Both sang songs in their native vernacular, and they were indeed interesting.

It was a late hour when the party retired.

Barney and Pomp remained aboard the Buckboard, but Frank and Martin accepted a kind invitation to sleep at the governor's house.

It was their first night in Australia.

Thus far all their enterprises had proved successful, and all were in high spirits.

Particularly so were Barney and Pomp.

"I done fink dis am a pooty fine kentry, eh, honey?" he ejaculated as he sniffed the balmy air.

"Bejabsers, it's nixt best place to ould Oireland," declared Barney.

Frank and Stanley Martin were destined to meet with experiences which would somewhat alter their opinion of the country.

Upon retiring to his room that night Frank saw that it was in the northeast corner of the governor's bungalow.

Below was dense shrubbery, palms and plantains.

Suddenly through the open window an object came hurtling in.

It fell upon the floor with a heavy thud.

For a moment Frank was startled. He was instantly on his guard, however.

He sprang backward to get out of range of any possible assassin below.

Then he regarded the object on the floor.

It was a blood red knife, and in falling it had struck point downward into the floor.

Frank was so astonished that for a moment he could not act.

Then he saw, upon closer scrutiny, that there was a slip of paper upon the hilt of the dirk.

At once he stepped forward and pulled the blade out of the floor. He detached the paper, and read inscribed in a scrawling hand:

"FRANK READE, JR.—Dear Sir: Yew kin no more track down Black Leon than yew kin fetch down the moon. There's a coffin and six feet of ground fer you if yew dare attempt it. Ther gal is safe, an' won't be hurt if ther ransom is paid. Her father is able to pay it—an' it's my bread an' butter, an' don't yew meddle!

"Yours, dangerously,

"LEON MARTEL."

Frank read the curious warning twice. Then he touched the bell wire.

In a few moments a native servant appeared. Frank said to him: "Ask your master, the governor, to come here at once. Tell him it is something of great importance."

It seemed an age to Frank before the summons was answered. There was a look of surprise in Archibald's eyes as he came in.

"Well, Frank," he said, "do you want to see me?"

"Yes."

"I am here."

"Read this."

Frank handed him the curious warning. The governor read it and then exclaimed in amazement:

"How did you get this?"

Frank showed the dirk.

"It was thrown through the window with this," he declared.

"Through the window?"

"Yes."

Archibald looked at the window with horror. His face was pale.

"How did they ever get into my garden?" he gasped. "It's the bushmen. We are in great danger."

"In danger?"

"Yes; at any moment they may shoot us with their poisoned javelins. That is certain death."

In spite of his usual hardihood Frank could not help a shiver.

"Have you not guards about the place?" he asked.

"Yes; but they must have eluded them. Wait and I will alarm the guard. Search must be made. We are not safe a moment. Come with me!"

"But I prefer to stay here," said Frank, drawing a revolver. "I have a quick shooter here, and if I get sight of one of the rogues he will have to be very quick if he eludes me."

"But I beg of you!" pleaded the governor. "Do not linger here. It is more than your life is worth! Come!"

Frank saw that the other was very much in earnest. Believing it the best plan he obeyed.

In a very short time the whole place was in an uproar.

The town even was aroused. Armed guards searched every part of the grounds and the house.

But if any of the bushmen had been in the vicinity they were not now, or at least they could not be found.

Doubtless they had made good their escape. At this moment an idea came to Stanley Martin.

"I wonder how Barney and Pomp are?" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose they have tackled them?"

"We will find out," said Frank.

Both started at once for the Buckboard. It was near the gate to the governor's grounds.

The electric light was burning in the forward compartment as they approached, and a glance was enough to settle all fears.

With the steel shutters pulled tightly down there was no chance for anybody to attack Barney and Pomp.

They were having a friendly game of cards, and as Frank and Stanley tapped on the blinds Barney sang out:

"Shure, an' who is there?"

"It's Frank!"

"All right, sor. Wait a moment!"

It was but a moment's work for Frank and Stanley to climb aboard as Barney pressed the key and the shutters went up.

"Upon my word!" said Frank to Martin, "I'm not going back to the governor's house to-night!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE BUSH COUNTRY.

"WHAT, sir! You are not?" asked Stanley, in surprise.

"No!"

"Why?"

"This is the safest place for us while we are in this danger beset country. By pulling down these shutters no one can creep in upon and assassinate us."

"You are right!" replied Stanley; "but what word will you send the governor—"

Before Martin could finish the sentence several of the armed guards appeared.

"The governor sends his compliments and says that you will be all safe at his house now," said the foremost.

Frank saluted and replied:

"Return my compliments to the governor, and tell him that I have decided to remain on board the Buckboard to-night."

The guard departed with this.

The shutters were closed. Barney took the first watch, and all the others turned in. They were as safe as possibly could be on board the Buckboard.

When the morning light came all were astir. The governor was down early to see them.

He deprecated seriously the incident of the night, and strove to smooth the matter over.

"My guards have never been lax before!" he declared, "but these bushmen are like shadows. They come and go like spirits."

"You ought to do something to rid the country of them!" declared Frank. "Certainly your life cannot be safe!"

"This is the first time that they have ever invaded my grounds to my knowledge."

"Look out in future," said Frank, "but I will deal with them in the right way as soon as I can ferret the rogues out."

"I pray Heaven you may have success!"

The stores were quickly put aboard the Buckboard. Then all was announced in readiness for the start.

It was a random mission that Frank was going on. Nobody could tell him where to find Martel.

"I think I should strike into the mountains," said the governor. "It is my opinion that Martel does not frequent the bush so much as his followers."

"That is true!" declared Harcourt. "I sincerely believe that my darling child is somewhere held prisoner up in the Kangaroo Hills."

"Very good," said Frank. "We will then try the Kangaroo Hills first of all."

Stanley Martin looked forward to the rescue of Mabel Harcourt with a peculiar thrill.

He had never seen the young girl in his life, but what he had seen of her photograph had made a deep impression upon him.

He was always a practical, matter of fact fellow, and this was the first feminine face to make an impression upon him.

"If I did not know myself so well," he declared, "I should think I was in love," this of course to himself.

The Buckboard at length was ready and rolled out of the town. Soon Keats was left far behind.

Passing once more out upon the plain beyond the coast range of hills, the Buckboard boomed along at a rapid rate.

Great droves of cattle were passed and groups of herders who looked at the machine with the keenest of wonderment.

Far to the horizon line Frank saw the blue outlines of what had been described to him as the Kangaroo Hills.

He headed the Buckboard straight for them.

Soon the immense farms began to fade out of sight and the Buckboard came to the real wilderness.

The sandy arid plains now took the place of the green prairie. There were clumps of bushes at various intervals. They were in the real bush country.

Here in a region which seemed hardly capable of supporting any form of life dwelt and reigned the terrible bushmen.

For days one might travel through this desolate region and fancy himself the only human being.

He would see not even a footprint, yet behind every bush there might be a lurking black foe.

So stealthy, so wily, are the bushmen that their movements are hard to follow. So peculiar their methods that a traveler can be in their death circle for days before the fatal blow is struck.

With a natural scent keener than that of the fox, they are always at home in the vast waste. They never want for food, for a snake, a toad, or a lizard is an appetizing morsel of the bush native.

Yet among this strange barbarous and animal-like class of people a white man of intelligence had gained a foothold, and had, indeed, become a chief.

Leon Martel had become a power in the bush, and the savage natives trusted him implicitly.

The Thugs of India do not compare with the Australian bushmen for deadliness of work—for mercilessness of purpose.

When, therefore, Mabel Harcourt fell into their power, she would have at once been slaughtered had it not been for Martel.

The Frenchman was not impressionable to a woman's charms. He detested them and his own race in general.

Martel was a miserable misanthrope, half a maniac, yet with a powerful method.

He sought wealth, and this was his plan to win it.

To hold the young girl for ransom was his purpose.

While she was in his care she should be well cared for. This he reckoned to his interests as well.

When he heard, therefore, that the Electric Buckboard was on his track he laughed the thing to scorn.

No one had yet succeeded in invading the bush country with temerity.

Had he known more of Frank Reade, Jr., and of the power of his wonderful machine he would not have been so sure of his game.

As the Buckboard penetrated deeper into the bush country more of the wonders of the region were seen.

Strange looking animals and reptiles not in the category of the naturalist or the zoologist were encountered.

Suddenly as the Buckboard was crossing a plain, from a thicket a number of strange, ungainly-looking creatures leaped forth.

"Kangaroos!" cried Stanley Martin. "What do you say to a kangaroo hunt, Frank?"

"Good!" cried the young inventor. "Let us try it by all means!"

The machine was sent at full speed after the animals.

But they now escaped into a deep bush entangled tract where the Buckboard could not go.

So Frank caused the machine to come to a halt. Then he cried:

"Come, Barney! You shall go with us. It is your turn now, and Pomp will remain with the machine. The next time Pomp shall be the favored one."

"All right, sor!" cried Barney, with alacrity. Then, unable to resist the impulse to get in a dig at Pomp: "Shure, sor, yez cudn't have made a better selection!"

"We shall see about that," said Frank, with a smile. "Get your rifle and come along."

Stanley Martin was already equipped for the hunt.

With their rifles and cartridge belts, the three adventurers set out upon the hunt. It was exhilarating sport.

The Buckboard had been left in a favorable spot in the verge of the bush.

The hunters took good care to mark their way so that they might not get lost. And thus they pushed ahead.

Frank had no fears of Pomp's safety. The darky had pulled down the steel shutters, and in case of an attack could easily make an escape. What was more, no foe could get at him.

For some while the three hunters pushed on through the bush.

Nothing more, however, was seen of the kangaroos.

But suddenly, as the party came to a small clump of palms, there was a strange shriek came from the foliage and a heavy body rushed through it.

"What is it?" exclaimed Martin, in surprise.

And well he might have asked the question. A huge bird, the size of an ostrich sprung down from concealment.

"An emu!" cried Frank. "Look out for it!"

But even as he spoke Barney fired. The bullet went true to the mark.

The emu, one of the most valuable birds of plumage of the Australian wilds fell in a heap.

A moment later the hunters were inspecting their prize.

"Mercy on us!" cried Martin; "what beautiful plumage! It can't be beat!"

"Bejabbers phwat wud some of the foine ladies in New Yorruck give fer that!" cried Barney.

But attention was almost instantly distracted from the emu to a new wonder which suddenly appeared.

The notes of a strange bird song were heard. Suddenly there appeared in a small open spot in the glade, a most beautiful bird. In plumage it far exceeded the beauty of the peacock.

"The lyre bird," cried Frank. "What a beautiful specimen!"

"My goodness!" exclaimed Stanley Martin. "What would not a taxidermist give for him? Can we not bag him?"

And the young American raised his rifle to take a shot at the lyre bird.

But Frank put a hand on his arm.

"Don't do it," said he. "The bullet will tear him all to pieces."

But the warning came too late. The rifle cracked and the bird tumbled over in a heap.

As luck had it, the bullet simply crushed its brain, instantly killing the bird without injuring the plumage.

Martin was delighted with his success and carefully placed the bird in his game bag.

The party now pushed on in quest of the kangaroos.

But those shrewd animals had evidently sought safer fields.

Nothing more was seen of them, but after a time the hunters came to the sandy shores of a small stream.

It was shallow enough to be easily waded, but the three adventurers were not wholly prepared for this.

"Shall we cross?" asked Stanley Martin.

But at that moment a sharp cry of surprise escaped the lips of Frank Reade, Jr. He had halted and was inspecting an object in the sand.

"What is it?" cried Stanley. "Why, upon my word?"

A glance was enough. It was a footprint in the sand. The three adventurers looked at it for a moment in silence.

The footprint was large and of a bare foot. That it did not belong to a white man seemed certain from the peculiar formation.

"It is the footprint of a bushman!" cried Stanley Martin. "At last we are in their country!"

Frank knelt down and examined the footprint more closely. When he arose he said:

"I believe you are right, Stanley. We must be on our guard now, for at any moment we are likely to get into trouble!"

The words had barely left his lips when Barney gave a yell of pain.

CHAPTER V.

POMP TO THE RESCUE.

"BEGORRA, it's kilt I am!" yelled the Celt.

Frank and Stanley turned to see the Irishman plucking a small arrow from the flesh of his arm. It was a thrilling moment.

Frank instantly made action.

"To cover!" he shouted, springing into the bush.

The others followed. Then the young inventor made Barney pull off his coat.

"Pray Heaven that is not a poisoned dart!" he cried.

The incision made by the arrow was but a slight one, but Frank fearlessly placed his lips to the wound and sucked the poison from it.

It was the saving of Barney's life.

The Celt felt exceedingly sick and weak, but he had yet strength enough to keep up. Some leaf tobacco was bound on the wound, to also neutralize the poison.

Barney rapidly overcame the poison. Meanwhile, Stanley had been looking for the rascally bushman everywhere.

But if he or his ilk were in the vicinity, there was no outward indication of it.

All was stillness in the neighborhood. Scarcely a leaf rustled, and there was not the slightest evidence of human or animal life.

Truly the bushman is a shadow. So consummate are they in their bushcraft that one might be surrounded by them and travel in their midst for days and yet never know it.

Frank knew that their position now was a most critical one.

It was certain that others would quickly come to join this one. Realizing this the young inventor said:

"I believe we had better get out of this locality as soon as possible. The quicker we get back to the machine the better!"

"I agree with you!" cried Stanley. "Suppose we make the break."

"All right!"

The three adventurers at once left cover and started for the machine. As nearly as possible they located the return trail.

But yet this was by no means an easy matter. The country had such a sameness and their excitement was so great that they failed to notice the signs which marked their course.

In this manner they kept on for some while. It was a very easy matter for them to thus lose the trail entirely.

It seemed an infinite length of time that they had kept on.

Then suddenly Stanley came to a halt.

His face was deadly pale.

"Upon my word, friends," he declared, "I believe we are lost."

Frank drew a whistle from his pocket and blew a shrill blast.

"If Pomp is in hearing," he declared, "he will hear that and come."

"Begorra, it's mesilf as thinks he's not anywheres near," declared Barney, dismally. "Shure, Misther Frank, it's a bade schrape we're in now."

"I guess you are right, Barney," said Frank, dubiously. "But let us not lose courage yet."

"By no means!" cried Stanley.

Again and again Frank blew the whistle. But no answer came. A tall tree was near by.

"Barney," said Frank, "you remember that the machine was not far from the large hill to the north? We went due west."

"Yis, sor."

"Climb that tree and tell me if you can where that hill is now."

"All roight, sor."

Barney went up the tree like a monkey. When near the top he studied the country closely and then shouted:

"Shure, sor, the hill is away to the southward, and yez kin barely see it."

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed the young inventor in dismay; "then we are in for it. We have traveled in almost an opposite direction. The hill is twice the distance from us now."

"You don't say!" cried Stanley. "Then we are in a bad scrape."

"It looks like it."

"What shall we do?"

"Try and pull out of it. Barney!"

"Yis, sor!"

"You cannot see anything of the bushmen, can you?"

"Divil a bit, sor; but whisht, now, it's a house I see!"

"A house?"

"Shure, sor—a log cabin!"

Frank exchanged astonished glances with Stanley.

That there should be a dwelling in this out of the way region seemed strange. They could hardly believe it.

"Are you sure of that, Barney?"

"Yis, sor!"

"Where is it?"

"Jist ferninst the ridge of land yonder, sor. There's a small lake beside it, sor."

"All right. Come down."

Barney slid down the tree.

"I don't know whether the place has a habitant, and if so whether friend or foe!" cried Frank. "I am going over to see."

"By all means!" agreed Stanley.

With this decision all started for the mysterious dwelling.

Pushing through the bush, scarce a hundred yards brought them to the gravelly shore of a small lake.

The log cabin was now visible.

It was quite a stable structure, but the door was broken in and the shutters badly shattered.

As the party hurried toward it they saw no sign of human life.

The place was deserted, at least by the living. But near the door the party came upon a grewsome sight.

There, half imbedded in the sand, was the whitening skeleton of a man. It must have been there a long while.

This told the story.

Some Australian farmer had been venturesome enough to take up a remote homestead.

The result was like many another case. He had fallen a victim to the deadly bushman.

But his habitation had been spared, though it was fast going to decay. But the fugitives had no time for speculation.

They had barely reached the door of the hut, when Stanley Martin gave a sharp cry.

Something whizzed past his ear and struck the logs. There, in one of them, was imbedded a dart.

In an instant the three white men sprang into the hut.

They were not a moment too soon.

The air became full of the poison darts. They came flying through the shutterless windows and endangered the lives of the fugitives.

Yet not one of the wily natives was to be seen.

But that the bush about was full of them, there was no doubt. It was a critical situation.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was equal to it.

"Bar the windows and doors!" he cried. "Look out and not expose yourselves!"

The shutters and door were of no use. But Frank ripped up some of the puncheon flooring.

This was employed to barricade the windows and door. Small crevices were left to fire through.

Then the party opened fire.

None of the bushmen could be seen, but the bullets were sent at random into the bush.

Whether this had a salutary effect or not could not be said.

But of a sudden the darts ceased coming, and all was the stillness of the grave. There seemed not a single foe in the vicinity.

"They are waiting for darkness," suggested Stanley.

"Or rather they mean to besiege us and starve us out!"

"Why, there are doubtless enough of them to capture us easily by making a charge."

"Ah, but that is not the bushman's way. He does not do that sort of thing. They are more cowardly in the open than our North American Indians," declared Frank.

"Then we're in a bad box!"

"Yes."

"Oh, if Pomp would only come."

"Begorra, its mesilf as will thry to skulk out av this an' foind the naygur whin darkness comes!" cried Barney.

"I don't believe you could outwit them," declared Frank, "they are a bad lot and probably as thick in that bush as mosquitoes."

"But something must be done!"

This was the unanimous sentiment. Yet what should it be? This, it was not easy to decide.

However, relief was nearer at hand than they had fancied.

Suddenly the rewas a dull rumble and then the report of a rifle. Not one in the party but knew what it meant.

"Hurrah!" cried Stanley Martin, "that is the machine!"

Then all looked out of their covert to see the Buckboard come down through the bush with a score of dark forms clinging to its sides.

The party had no time to philosophize upon the sudden appearance of Pomp, or how he had become apprised of their peril.

It was enough to know that he was on hand. The steel curtains were drawn and the bushman could do him no harm.

But the Buckboard took a turn around the cabin crushing the bushmen in numbers, and finally compelling them to abandon the attack.

Like mist before the sun they vanished into the bush.

Then Pomp brought the Buckboard to a stop near the door of the hut. His black face appeared at the pilot window and he cried, eagerly:

"Marse Frank, am yo' dere?"

"Pomp, you're a hero!" cried Frank, joyfully. "We're all in here and safe. But how did you know we were here?"

"Fo' de Lor', Marse Frank, I done heah yo' firing, an' I jes' come ober fo' to gib yo' help!"

"You heard us firing?"

"Yes, sah!"

"Why, you must have been three or four miles away!"

"I done flink I was, sah, but de wind was jes' in my direckshun an' it come pooty plain."

"Good enough! You have saved our lives, Pomp."

"Yo' don' say dat!"

"Yes, I do."

"Bress mah heart, I'se done glad ob dat!" cried the delighted ducky.

The rescued adventurers cheered. Then the machine was run nearer to the door of the hut and they dodged into the machine.

That the bushmen had not abandoned the vicinity was made certain when a number of the poisoned darts came banging against the steel curtains.

Once inside them our adventurers were perfectly safe.

Only cannon could hope to penetrate that curtain of steel. Frank was determined to give the bushmen a fight.

"I know they are spoiling for it!" he cried. "And I feel like wiping a few of them out of existence."

The manner in which he proposed to do this was quickly made manifest.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOUNTAIN CAVERN.

FRANK went straight to the electric gun. He threw open the breech and placed therein a dynamite cartridge.

Then he elevated the gun, took a sight and pressed the electric key. The result was thrilling.

There was a hiss, a whirr, and a slight recoil.

There was no report as the projectile left the gun. But when it struck the ground in the heart of the bush there followed an explosion like a park of artillery.

It was one tremendous roar. Then up into the air fifty feet went a column of sand.

In it were the bodies of a number of the skulking wretches, and all manner of debris.

The force of the bomb was most terrible. There was blown into the ground a hole high deep enough to sink the log cabin in.

Once more Frank placed the electric gun in position.

This time he employed a different kind of a projectile.

It was an explosive bomb, filled with fine shot, which would sweep a radius of twenty yards, cutting all down before it.

It mowed down heaps of brush, and where the bushmen were hiding they were not agile enough to avoid this destroyer.

Again and again Frank sent these bombs into the bush.

A literal path was mowed for hundreds of yards in all directions in the bush.

Dozens of dead bushmen lay about. For once they had met more than their match.

It was enough for them, and they at once beat an incontinent retreat.

In a short while, it was safe to say, that all were far beyond range.

It was a victory for the Buckboard and its crew.

But now the question arose as to what move was best to be made next?

It was of course necessary to find the den of Black Leon, and, if possible, to rescue Mabel Harcourt.

The Kangaroo Hills were near at hand. Why not invade them?

"I believe that is our best move," declared Frank. "The quicker we track the villain down the better."

"So say I," agreed Stanley. "He may get alarmed and perhaps slaughter the girl."

It was decided to at once strike for the hills; so the Buckboard was sent ahead at full speed.

It required no little dexterity for Barney at the wheel to pick his way in and out among the bush.

But he succeeded admirably, until at length this was left behind and the long plain extending to the Kangaroo Hills was reached.

This was clear of bush or obstruction of any kind.

The Buckboard glided along at full speed, until at length the base of the hills was reached.

The Kangaroo Hills were rocky and cleft with deep and dark defiles.

A better or more likely retreat for a gang of robbers or murderers could not be imagined.

Darkness had now settled down, and it was decided to wait until the morrow before invading the hills.

The steel curtains were drawn tightly, and the evening meal was prepared by Pomp.

All were hungry and partook of it with a keen relish.

After supper Frank went forward and put the search-light into requisition.

As the powerful rays shot up the mountain side, objects there were revealed as plain as day.

Frank and Stanley carefully examined every part of the mountain in this way.

The result was thrilling.

While the search-light was turned full upon the left or north side of the mountain, suddenly the face of a mighty cliff was shown.

Above this was a broad shelf of rock, and upon this there was congregated a large crowd of human beings.

Back of them yawned the mouth of a cavern.

They were natives, as could be plainly seen—bushmen—and carried torches.

It was evident that they had seen the Buckboard.

As the search-light's dazzling rays smote upon them they all flung up their arms as if to ward off a blow.

No doubt the brilliant light had blinded as well as astonished them.

"I'll wager that is Black Leon's den!" said Frank, positively.

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

"Then we have gained a great point. I did not think we would find it so soon."

"We will investigate anyhow, in the morning!" declared Frank.

"But—do you think they will be content with letting us alone? May they not try some game to-night?"

"We must keep a watch on them. I do not think they can do us any harm, protected as we are."

"And to-morrow we will try to invade their den?"

"Yes."

"How can we do that?"

"That is a hard question to answer just now!" replied Frank. "We will have to wait until to-morrow before answering it. However, I am confident we shall find a way."

"I hope so!"

Then Frank shut off the search-light. In the darkness the glimmer of the torches could now be seen far above.

Frank was tempted to send an electric bolt up there from the gun. But on second thought he decided that this would be a wanton destruction of life.

So he refrained from doing it. However, he called Barney and said:

"You will be the first on watch to-night, Barney!"

"Yes, sor!"

"Keep the search-light fixed on that cavern in the mountains, and also give it a sweep over the vicinity once in awhile to make sure that it is clear!"

"All right, sor!"

All in the party were tired.

They were glad of the opportunity of turning in, and soon were in the land of dreams.

Barney was left on guard the first of the night. The Celt was always a faithful man at such a post.

He kept assiduous watch of the mountain side, and all in the vicinity. He was guarded against a surprise.

Several times he fancied he saw dark forms hovering among the rock piles on the mountain side. But each time beneath the glare of the search-light they vanished.

Pomp relieved Barney at midnight; but the machine was not molested that night.

The next morning, upon looking up to where the cliff cavern was located no sign of a human being could be seen.

But as they were studying the place, suddenly the burly form of a half naked black was seen to appear not a hundred yards distant.

In his hand he carried a white flag.

He was a giant of his race; his form was naked save for a breech clout and short dress of emu feathers. He stood for a moment waving the flag.

"Hello!" cried Frank, "a truce!"

"Perhaps they want to treat with us," said Stanley.

"More likely it is a demand for surrender," said Frank. "I know these black rascals well."

"That will never do."

"No," replied the young inventor. "But let us see what he has to say, anyway."

With which Frank raised the steel curtain and stepped out. He held up his hands in token of amity.

This satisfied the black, who now rapidly advanced. When twenty feet distant he made an extravagant bow.

Frank affected to ignore this, and said sternly:

"Well, what is your errand?"

"Me come from chief Black Leon," replied the fellow, in broken English. "He send you letter."

With which the bushman held out a missive. Frank took it.

It was of coarse paper, and the chirography was rude and scrawling. Thus it read:

"FRANK READE, JR.,—You hev seen fit ter not heed ther warning given yer at ther governor's house, an' now once more I tell ye to turn round an' go back. Ye never kin git ther gal without paying ther ransom. What's more, if it ain't paid pooty soon, I shall declare it off an' make the gal my wife. I'm jest as good a white man as yew, but I'm in ther bush until I hev made a fortune, an' then you'll see me out of it. So take my advice and fetch ther fifty thousand pounds. Ther old cove won't feel it, fer he's rich as a Jew. Yures trooly,
"LEON MARTEL."

Frank read this peculiar epistle with certainly most peculiar sensations.

"Well," he muttered, finally, "I must say that is the nerviest rascal I've met in many a day. However, I will answer this message."

With this Frank wrote on the back of the note:

"TO LEON MARTEL:

"I cannot for a moment think of accepting your advice. I consider that I am really the dictator, and will say now that if you do not surrender the lady at once, it will be the worse for you. I have the power to blow you and your gang into eternity.

"Yours ever,

"FRANK READE, JR."

Frank tendered this to the black.

"Take this to your master!" he said. "But wait!"

The fellow paused.

"How many of you are there up there?"

It was a shrewdly put question. Frank had hoped to catch the fellow off his guard. But the wily native shrugged his shoulders and then dug his bare toes into the sand.

"As many as those are!" he replied, tersely, indicating the grains of sand.

"Indeed!" said Frank, coolly. "Quite an army, aren't you? Well, tell me this: Do you all live in that cave?"

The black grinned, but would not speak. He shook his head, then made a peculiar gesture with his hand.

With which he unceremoniously took his departure. Frank watched him out of sight.

Then he pulled down the steel shutters.

"Well," said Stanley, with a deep breath, "what do you think of it, Frank?"

"Of what?"

"Of the situation!"

The young inventor was silent a moment. Then he replied, sharply:

"All get ready for battle. It is my opinion we are going to have a lively time with those dogs and right away, too."

The prediction came true as near events were bound to assert.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BATTLE.

THE bush native had disappeared with Frank's reply to Martel's message. Frank brought the Buckboard about, so that the electric gun pointed directly to the cave so far above.

Some time elapsed. It was quite a climb up the mountain side, but the result of Frank's reply to Martel's message was soon made evident.

Down from the heights there came a savage and defiant yell.

"That is what I thought!" said Frank, grimly. "They mean business, don't they?"

"Well, we are ready for them," said Stanley, confidently.

"You are right!"

Then with a fearful cry of alarm Frank sprang to the wheel.

Quick as a flash he opened the electric lever.

The wagon shot ahead.

It was not a moment too soon.

Down the mountain came a tremendous boulder weighing tons. It had been dislodged, and rolled down directly for the Buckboard.

Had it struck the Buckboard little would have been left of it. But Fate was not so unkind.

Frank acted just in the nick of time.

The boulder barely missed the machine and went crashing through the brush a hundred yards away.

Every man aboard the Buckboard was pale and startled.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Stanley, "that was a close call!"

"Begorra, av it had struck us, moighty little we'd known av it!" cried Barney.

"Look out dar, chilluns!" cried Pomp. "Dar am anudder comin'!"

This was true.

The bushmen had started another boulder. Indeed, they were swarming on the mountain side, and trying to dislodge heavy stones everywhere.

To dodge all these missiles Frank knew would be an impossibility.

Sooner or later one would strike the machine. It were better to face a ten pounder cannon.

Much against his will Frank decided to beat a retreat.

He opened the electric lever and let the machine run out onto the plain. But before it had gone fifty yards a casualty overtook it.

A half spent boulder struck the machine just forward of the rear wheel. The Buckboard came to a halt.

There was a crash and every one on board was thrown from his feet.

Frank was the first to recover. The electric engines were buzzing and whirring like a top.

He sprang to the switch and shut off the current.

Then swift as a flash, he opened a port slide and looked under the machine.

The rear axle was resting hard against the boulder, which was partly shivered by the impact.

Some of the steel bracing rods were broken, but Frank could not see that the machine was otherwise injured.

It was a close call. Had the boulder struck it at full speed, the result would have been serious.

The really bad effects, as it was, seemed to be the obstruction of the Buckboard's progress. It could not well be freed from the obstruction without its inmates leaving the interior. And this, to say the least, was risky just now.

For the bushmen, with yells of triumph, were coming down the slope to the attack, no doubt believing their foe crippled.

The exigency was a thrilling one. But the defenders of the Buckboard were equal to it.

Frank hastily elevated the electric gun to an angle from which he could train it upon the foe by means of a side port hole.

Then he thrust a projectile into the breech and adjusted the compressed air valve.

Barney and Pomp and Stanley had all gone to the rear port holes with their rifles.

They at once opened fire upon the bushmen.

This was returned sharply, but of course the bullets could do no harm.

They rattled against the side of the wagon harmlessly.

But the intent of the bushmen, as could be plainly seen, was to attack the wagon bodily.

This might result seriously for the defenders, particularly if the foe should succeed in getting to close quarters.

The machine could be badly damaged and ultimately broken open by heavy blows.

This contingency was certainly one to be avoided.

It was necessary to repulse the attack of the foe at once.

Should they fail in this, the worst might be feared.

"Whurroo!" yelled Barney. "Give it to the omadhauns! Shure here goes!"

With which he fired his rifle. His aim was deadly, and one of the bushmen fell.

But they came down the hill in swarms. Their numbers were beyond computation at the moment.

The defenders of the Buckboard now opened fire.

Frank took careful sight with the electric gun.

He depended wholly upon this. He knew full well that the rifles could not hold that immense throng back a moment.

So he aimed the electric gun carefully. Then he pressed the electric lever.

The compressed air escaped with a swish, and straight to the mark went the projectile.

Frank had aimed at a point directly in front of the advancing horde. The projectile struck there and exploded.

It was like a small earthquake.

Up into the air shot a column of earth, debris, and a great swath was mowed in the ranks of the bushmen.

It was a frightful blow, and for a moment held them in check.

Frank saw his opportunity, and did not fail to make use of it. Quick as a flash he loaded the gun again.

Once more a terrible explosion followed in the very midst of the gorge. It did terrible execution.

"Bejabers, give it to 'em, Misther Frank!" yelled Barney. "Shure, it's a batin' we'll give 'em this time."

Once more the bushmen rallied. They were so strong in numbers that they were only checked for a moment.

But Frank had plenty of ammunition. Again and again he fired at the horde.

Scores of them were blown into eternity. Their bodies lay in heaps about.

While a perfect breastwork had been erected by the accumulation of debris tossed up by the explosive shells, their work was most awful to witness.

Several times more the bushmen tried to cover the intervening space; but the deadly gun blew them back each time.

They might as well have tried to stem the tide of the ocean. It was death to a certainty.

And finally this fact became actually impressed upon them. They broke ranks and incontinently fled.

The rout was most severe. Dozens were picked off by the riflemen of the Buckboard.

While not one on board the machine was injured. It was a wonderful escape from what had seemed like certain death, for to fall into the hands of the bushmen would have been death.

The defenders of the Buckboard could not repress a cheer.

But Frank Reade, Jr., knew the importance of prompt action.

He called to the others to assist him.

"Come!" he cried. "Let us get the machine free of that boulder before they come again."

"All right, sir!" cried Barney, cheerily.

"I'se comin', sah," returned Pomp.

Frank touched the electric spring and the rear curtain rose. Then all climbed out.

There was no immediate danger, for they were out of range; quick action was made.

The boulder was quickly pried away and removed. The machine now rested on the level.

The broken rods were removed and the bent ones straightened. So far as could be seen, little harm had been done the machine.

"All right!" cried Frank, joyfully, as he sprang aboard. "Now for a trip up to the cavern."

"Then we will beard the lion in his den?" asked Stanley.

"Yes."

"I hope we shall rescue the girl."

"We will try."

Frank went to the electric gun and trained it upon the cavern above. Then he pressed the lever.

A projectile was sent into the mouth of the cave. It exploded with terrific force.

The way was now clear for the machine to invade the stronghold of the bushmen.

Accordingly Frank started the Buckboard slowly up the mountain side.

The Buckboard had been especially devised for mountain climbing. But soon an obstacle was encountered which seemed a barrier to reaching the cavern.

A path too narrow for the machine to ascend was apparently the only method of reaching the cave.

What was to be done?

This was a problem.

However, Frank was determined not to be beaten. But as darkness was shutting down it seemed unlikely that they would be able to do more that night.

The Buckboard was allowed to rest in a favorable position. All were more or less exhausted, and Pomp proceeded to get the evening meal.

But the search-light was now turned fairly upon the mouth of the cave, and a close watch of it kept.

"If they are in there I'll keep them there!" declared Frank. "If not, and they try to enter, it will be at their peril."

But not a bushman seemed in the vicinity.

They had disappeared most mysteriously. Whether they had abandoned the fight entirely, or were merely indulging in a respite, it was not easy to say.

After the evening meal was over a discussion was held.

It was not easy to decide what was the best thing to do.

Time was valuable, most certainly. If the villain, Martel, should see that he was likely to be beaten, no doubt he would kill the fair captive rather than give her up.

It was a perplexing problem.

But finally Stanley Martin said:

"I have a plan."

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank. "What may it be?"

"We have got to take a different course, or we shall never save her. One of us must try to rescue her by strategy."

"What? Do you think we can cope with such masters of strategy as these Australian blacks?" asked Frank.

"Yet I see no other way!" replied Stanley, positively. "And I will say that I am willing to try it."

CHAPTER VIII.

A RISKY EXPEDITION.

FRANK looked at the young man as if he doubted his sincerity.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"I do."

"How will you proceed?"

"I shall first visit the cavern. I shall seek the cover of darkness.

I shall try to invade the den, and if possible rescue the prisoner by strategy."

Frank shook his head.

"That is risky," he said. "I am afraid they will get the best of you."

"Nothing venture, nothing have!"

"That is true."

"If I am willing to try it you will not object?"

"Certainly not."

Without a word further Martin began his preparations. It was evident that he was in earnest.

The darkness was now intense. Frank watched him a moment and then an inspiration seized him.

"Look here, Stanley!" he said.

"Well, sir!"

"Are you really in earnest?"

"Of course, I am!"

"I dislike to see you go."

"Do you?"

"Yes!"

"I am sorry. But I have made up my mind. You will give me credit for good resolution."

"I do, but as I said before, I dislike to see you go alone. I am going with you."

Stanley was astounded.

"You?" he gasped.

"Yes."

"Well, I am glad. Do you really mean that?"

"Why, of course I do."

Stanley again expressed his pleasure. Frank now gave explicit directions to Barney and Pomp.

"Hold this position as long as you can!" he said. "Don't give it up!"

"Don't yez fear for that, sir!" cried Barney, confidently.

Frank now took Stanley by the arm and said:

"I do not propose that we shall take any undue risk in this undertaking of ours."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you thought how simple a matter it would be for one of those poison darts to take us off?"

"Indeed I have."

"Then I propose to use a preventive."

"A preventive?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Frank took from one of the lockers a long deep box of light stained pine. This he opened and took up a heap of shining steel netting.

There it hung, revealed as steel net armor, of the very finest and most pliable pattern.

"A shirt of mail!" exclaimed Stanley, in amazement.

"Yes, there are three entire suits here. They are made of the best steel, and will resist any rifle ball. They are my own invention."

"Wonderful!" cried Stanley, joyfully. "Then we need not fear the darts?"

"Not in the least."

"Or anything, for that matter!"

"Except capture. That would not be pleasant. Now put on your armor."

In a few moments both men were dressed in the steel net armor. It fitted them neatly.

Then, with their weapons, they were ready to leave the Buckboard. All was stygian gloom as Frank raised the curtain.

A few parting words of advice to Barney and Pomp and the two men vanished in the night.

Far above the search-light made the entrance to the cavern as light as day. Its location could not be mistaken.

And as the two scouts, for such they were, left the Buckboard, they started directly for it.

They moved silently and shadow-like through the gloom.

So far as they could see there was not a bushman in the vicinity. Yet, for aught they knew, a hundred might be lurking in the shadows about.

But cautiously they climbed the steep and rocky path to the mouth of the cavern.

Thus far they felt sure that their motions had been unseen. Yet with every sense upon the alert they entered the cavern.

It was of mighty depth and height. Truly a better or more inaccessible stronghold the bushmen could not have chosen.

And yet no sign of them was visible.

If they were in the place they were somewhere in its depths. Not a sound could be heard which might come from them.

"That is queer," whispered Frank. "Where are they, Stanley?"

"It must be that this cavern extends deep into the mountain. Probably they are in there. Or possibly there is another outlet, and they have departed altogether."

"You are right," agreed Frank. "Let us go on."

Darkness lay before them.

Of course the rays of the electric light could not penetrate further than the mouth at that angle.

But Frank had a small electric lamp of his own invention with him for he had foreseen this exigency.

This he now employed and with excellent results.

Down through the arches of the cavern the two explorers went.

But a surprise was in store for them. The cavern did not extend a

limitless distance into the bowels of the earth as Stanley had imagined.

They suddenly came to a halt.

They were again in outer air. The cavern roof was no longer above them. A more astonishing contingency could hardly have been imagined.

"Well!" exclaimed Frank, in amazement. "Where are we at?"

"Give it up!" replied Stanley. "We're certainly out of the cavern."

"Yes."

"I think I have it."

"What?"

"This is the end of the cavern, or rather its other mouth. It is merely a passage through the hill."

"I believe you are right. We are then in a sort of pocket in the hills."

"Yes."

Just at that moment Frank gave a great start.

"Look!" he cried, pointing away into the gloom.

"What is it?"

"Can't you see?"

A faint star of light was seen in the distance. The two explorers regarded it a moment curiously.

"It is not a camp-fire."

"Nor a torch!"

"It looks like the light from the window of some dwelling!"

"It may be. At least it is for us to find out, so come along!"

They started away through the gloom. As they were now right in the enemies' stronghold they extinguished the electric lamp.

The surface of the ground beneath their feet was grassy. Above outlined against the sky on all hands they saw mountain peaks.

Frank's diagnosis that they were in a sort of pocket or deep valley, in the hills was correct.

Nature could not have designed a better stronghold for the outlaws for such the bushmen were.

For some while the two men kept on. Then suddenly Frank clutched Stanley's arm.

"Down!" he gasped.

Down they sank behind a large rock. They were not a moment too soon.

Up through the gloom before them loomed two tall forms. Near enough to be touched as they passed.

It was a narrow escape.

That they were bushmen was certain. Our explorers now fully comprehended the risk they were incurring.

They were right in the midst of the treacherous foe's stronghold. Their peril was of the most deadly kind.

Of course discovery meant death. The greatest of care must be exercised.

The rashness of their move could be easily seen. Literally they were in a trap.

It had been easy enough to get into the place. It would be no easy matter to get out.

But yet neither experienced fear. They were cool and ready to fight for their lives.

"Is the coast clear?" finally Stanley whispered.

"I think so," returned Frank.

"It was a close call!"

"We made a great mistake in coming in here. I am afraid we will yet be captured!"

"Let us hope not."

"I wish we could get the machine up here."

"Yes, it would be an easy matter to capture the place then; perhaps we shall find another entrance."

For some while longer they waited to make sure that the coast was clear; then they ventured to go on.

For neither thought of turning back. Now that they were in the pocket, they were determined to stay there until something was accomplished.

For some while they had kept on. Then they became satisfied beyond all doubt that the star of light which they had seen, came from the window of a cabin or native hut.

"Perhaps that is the prison of Mabel Harcourt," ventured Stanley.

"Is it not likely?"

"It is possible," agreed Frank. "We will try and find out."

"You are right, we will."

Stanley was now all eagerness. He pushed forward impetuously, and this very anxiety came near costing him his life.

Suddenly dark forms seemed to swarm about the two explorers. Where they came from was not evident to either.

But they were instantly surrounded by a legion of foes.

Had it not been for the armor at that moment their career would have quickly closed.

For a shower of darts literally rained against the steel meshes. Any one of these would have been fatal.

"We are in for it, Frank," gasped Stanley Martin. "We've got to fight!"

"Yes, look out for yourself. We must separate!" cried Frank.

The young inventor instinctively realized that this was the only safe move to make. This would certainly have the effect of dividing the force of enemies—a desirable end.

So Frank plunged one way and Stanley the other. But the blacks closed in upon the young New Yorker in a swarm.

He staggered, reeled and went down with his foes close upon him.

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK HAS A NARROW ESCAPE.

BUT Stanley Martin was not the sort to yield so long as he had breath and strength left.

He was instantly upon his feet. Right into the midst of his foes he plunged.

Right and left he whirled his clubbed rifle, for at such short range it was useless to stand and fire.

The bushmen went down like ten pins.

The athletic young American literally cleared his path.

Then away he dashed into the gloom at random.

And after him came the legion of shadow forms.

He strained every nerve to distance them.

But this was not so easy. They clung to his heels like hornets.

The poison darts rattled against the steel meshes of his armor.

But finally the pace began to tell.

He gained on his pursuers, and after a time experienced the satisfaction of knowing that he was getting the best of the race.

But yet he had been unable to shape his course. He had been dashing on at random.

And suddenly he felt the earth give way beneath him, he fell through space into cool waters which closed over him.

Meanwhile Frank Reade, Jr., was having fully as thrilling an experience.

The bushmen were close upon him in a mad foot race for life.

But fortunately Frank had taken a straight course for the cave. As he ran on he became aware of this.

The glare from the electric light was reflected upon the sky. This guided him.

Frank was a swift runner, and the bushmen did not gain upon him. He reached the entrance to the cavern. But here dark forms arose in his path.

Only lightning quickness and the best of judgment saved him then. Quick as a flash he let out with his fists, for he had thrown his rifle away. Down went the man in front of him.

The next one made a blow at him with a knife; but the steel mail turned aside the blade easily.

Again Frank struck out savagely with his mailed hand. There is no race on earth equal to the American for fighting at fisticuffs.

The bushmen evidently did not understand the craft, for Frank knocked them down like wooden pegs.

They could not stand up before him a moment.

But he saw that it was necessary to make the quickest sort of an effort to break through them.

They were closing upon him with the greatest of rapidity; of course weight of numbers would tell against him.

But Frank was just in time.

Through the line of foes he burst; he dashed through the cavern and emerged into the glare of the search-light.

At that moment he was seen by Barney and Pomp, who were below on the Buckboard.

"Golly!" cried Pomp, "dat am Marse Frank."

"Begorra, phwere's Stanley?" asked Barney.

"I done fear he am killed or mebber taken prisoner."

"Bejabbers, if that's so bad cess to the omadhouns."

With which Barney turned the electric gun upward. He waited until Frank had got into the path.

The mouth of the cavern was filled with bushmen.

Barney pressed the lever.

There was a terrific explosion in the mouth of the cavern. The bushmen were stricken down in heaps.

As the smoke cleared away, they had disappeared, retreating into the cavern.

A few moments later Frank Reade, Jr., reached the machine.

Barney raised the steel curtain and Frank sprang aboard. They were overjoyed to greet him, but Barney cried:

"Faith, sor, an' phwhativer has become of the other gentleman?"

"We separated," declared Frank. "I hope harm has not come to him. I almost feel bound to go to his aid."

"Shure, sor. I hope as how no harm will come to him, as it's a broth av a boy he is!" cried Barney.

Frank now began to worry about Stanley. He kept a constant watch for him.

But as time passed and he did not appear, the very worst of fears assailed him.

What should he do?

He felt in duty bound to go to the assistance of the young New Yorker. But how was he to do it?

"Oh, if there was only a way in which we could get the machine up to the mouth of the cavern!" he cried.

The cavern was truly wide enough for the machine to pass through. But the path was too narrow.

Some hours passed, and Frank grew extremely uneasy.

It was then that a new idea occurred to him.

If he could only climb the mountain at some other place, it was possible that he could get a position from which at least the pocket or inner valley could be covered by the electric gun.

This might enable him to drive the bushmen from their stronghold, and at least he could learn the fate of Stanley Martin.

The gray light of dawn was breaking in the east.

Frank started the Buckboard along the base of the mountain.

But a short distance beyond the cliff he found an accessible point. Up the ascent the Buckboard went.

Gradually he crept upward. From that height an extended view of the country could be had.

The top of the mountain was rough and craggy.

But Frank found a pass which seemed to lead over the elevation. After some hours of slow work the Buckboard actually crossed the mountain range.

The region beyond could be seen.

There were boundless plains and lakes of water. Dense forests extended to the northward.

Deep in the heart of the hills was the pocket. It seemed almost inaccessible.

But the Buckboard picked its way along until arrived at a point just above it.

And here to Frank's joy he saw a smooth descent. Down this the machine went until it rolled out upon the floor of the valley.

But not a sign of the enemy was to be seen. What did it mean?

A small creek or stream of water flowed through the valley, and ran into a subterranean passage in the mountain.

At the upper end of the valley a small hut, made of palm logs and thatched with wild grass, was seen.

This was the hut in which Frank and Stanley had seen the light the night before. Frank critically surveyed the vicinity.

"That is queer!" he exclaimed. "What has become of them all?"

He took a run around the valley with the Buckboard, but not one of the bushmen was in sight.

It certainly looked as if the valley was really deserted.

Surprised beyond measure, Frank approached the cabin. The door was open and it seemed empty.

The young inventor opened the steel curtain, and leaped down from the Buckboard.

He approached the cabin boldly. He entered it, and saw that it was untenanted.

But there was every indication that it had been lately occupied, and as Frank looked curiously about he was given a great start.

In one corner of the one room of the cabin was a table.

Sticking up in the center of this was a keen bladed knife.

To his astonishment Frank saw that it pinned a scrap of paper down upon the wood. He saw that there was a scrawling bit of handwriting on it.

It was done in blood, and read:

"Ye will never catch the fox. When ye get well into ther trap, we will spring it on ye. Take warning! Look out for yerselves,

"Yures with hatred,
"LEON MARTEL."

Frank turned about with a grim smile. He went back to the Buckboard.

"Shure, sor, an' phwat do yez think of it?" asked Barney. "Phwere iver have the spalpeens gone?"

"They have given us the slip that is evident," declared Frank.

"But never mind, we will come up with them yet."

"Golly, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, "wha'ebber hab become of Marse Stanley?"

Frank could not answer this question.

He was prone to admit that it was a mystery; yet he feared the worst.

"It may be that he is in hiding somewhere," he declared. "Let us hope so anyhow."

"Bejabers, I'm afther fearin' the worst," said Barney, soberly.

"Shure, it's too bad it is."

Frank knew that there was no use in remaining longer in the valley. The bushmen were not there.

But he considered the feasibility of leaving the place by another way, if such existed.

So he sent the machine around the valley looking for such. This resulted in the discovery of a small pass at the north end.

Fortunately it was wide and clear enough of obstacles to admit of the passage of the machine.

After following this for a time the Buckboard came out upon the opposite side of the mountain range and upon the border of the plain.

Here a literal colony of jack-rabbits were seen. They covered acres of ground with their burrows.

"The pest of this country," declared Frank. "There are parts of Australia where they have totally ruined the country and driven the settlers out."

"Shure, sor, it would be foine hunting here!" cried Barney.

"Some av thim foine gentlemen in New York should cum out here an' thry it."

"They would find a surfeit," laughed Frank. "I have no doubt Australian settlers would welcome them, and pay them a large bounty."

"Golly! I'se jes' gwine to hab a rabbit stew afo' I leaves dis paht!" cried Pomp, with glistening eyes.

The machine here came to a stop. Frank was literally in a quandary as to what it was best to do.

But suddenly, while in this state of mind, some startling incidents at once claimed his attention.

"Shure, Misther Frank!" cried Barney, wildly, from the forward compartment. "Wud yez luk at this horrible baste coming for us?"

Frank sprang to the forward window and glanced out. He saw a strange and monstrous animal of an unknown species, which had just emerged from the bush.

CHAPTER X.

SUBTERRANEAN ADVENTURES.

BUT what of the fate of Stanley Martin? We left him in rather a serious predicament.

The fall which he experienced was over the bank into the creek, and down into the water he went with a splash.

His pursuers of course were familiar with the locality and easily avoided his mishap.

The bushmen paused on the bank, and for a moment seemed at a loss what to do.

Then they filled the air with hoarse cries, and some of them ran down the bank following the course of the stream, while others plunged into the water.

But not a trace of the fugitive could they find.

Stanley had mysteriously vanished.

They were off the scent.

Torches were produced and the search continued, but in vain. The bushmen naturally concluded that the fugitive had sank never to rise again, and that he was dead.

Accordingly after awhile they left the vicinity.

But Stanley had not gone down to his death. His escape, however, was a most miraculous one.

The current at this point was quite swift. It carried him over some rapids, and he could barely manage to keep himself afloat.

He was a strong swimmer, and this counted greatly in his favor.

He made no effort to gain the shore. He knew that his best move would be to, if possible, float down the current until he had thrown his pursuers off the track.

The steel armor which he wore weighted him down very heavily. It was with extreme difficulty, aided by the swift water, that he kept up.

He had the satisfaction of knowing that his foes had given over the chase, and that he had really given them the slip.

But now a new danger arose, and one which he had not anticipated. Suddenly a cavernous roaring seemed to sweep down over him.

Stars and sky were instantly shut out.

All became Stygian gloom.

Where was he?

He was still afloat and yet breathed. He certainly was not beneath the surface.

Just at that moment he put out his hand and felt a cold, slimy surface at his right. Then far back of him he saw a circular patch of sky fast fading out.

"My soul!" he reflected, "this creek runs underground, and the current has carried me thither."

A momentary thrill of horror came over him.

He reflected upon what a fearful thing it would be to be carried into the bowels of the earth in this way.

"God help me!" he groaned. "I shall never see the light of day again!"

But only for a moment was the young New Yorker thus depressed. Grit was one of his peculiar qualities, and he had plenty of it. It now came to his relief.

It was madness to attempt to swim up against the current.

He would not attempt that. He clung to the hope that the stream would soon come to the surface again.

In that case he would be doubly certain of safety from his enemies. He could gain the shore and find his way back to the Buckboard perhaps before morning.

Then for the first time he thought of Frank Reade, Jr., and wondered what was his fate.

Had he been killed or captured by the foe?

Stanley hoped sincerely that he had been lucky enough to escape even as he had.

But the young New Yorker now felt his strength giving out. His armor was a terrible handicap.

He was tempted to remove it and let it go to the bottom. He decided to do this if it should so happen that it became necessary in order to preserve his life.

Down the current he still continued to float.

Suddenly he was given a thrilling start. This was at the plainly audible and nearby sound of human voices!

"Jupiter!" he muttered. "What is coming now?"

He instantly raised himself out of the water. Far below and at a point toward which he was rapidly drifting he saw a very bright light.

It was that of a fire, as he plainly saw. Also there were smaller lights flashing like torches.

"What am I coming to!" he muttered. "This is very queer!"

But he could not have checked his course at this point had he desired to do so.

The current was very swift. He was carried down rapidly, and suddenly came out in a great pool, the smooth surface of which was fire-lit.

He saw the high arches of a mighty cavern chamber?

It extended far back from the banks of the creek, where he saw a huge fire and a group of forms.

Upon the bank were drawn out a number of rough dugout canoes, and a huge raft.

"What manner of settlement is this!" reflected Stanley. "Is it an underground retreat of Martel?"

Then his heart leaped as he thought of the possibility that accident, or a happy chance had really carried him into the bushmen's den, and possibly he would be enabled to effect the rescue of Mabel Harcourt.

With this thought, his whole being thrilled, and he thought of nothing else.

New strength came to him, and in the still waters of the pool he floated for a few moments deliberating upon the best and safest move to make.

This seemed to be to drift down below the camp-fire and gain the shore there unseen by any of the foe.

In this attempt he passed very close to the end of the raft.

A deadly fear assailed him that he might be seen by the bushmen as he was directly in the glare of the light.

But he reached the raft safely.

He clutched the corner with one hand; voices were near at hand. He saw a tall form between him and the firelight.

Instantly he recognized it as that of a white man. Before him stood several blacks. He was addressing them angrily.

"Now ye black devils," he said, with an oath, "if ye don't keep good watch over that gal, I'll cut yer hearts out! See! mind what I say!"

"Mercy," thought Stanley, "that is Martel himself. What if he should get his eye on me?"

But yet the young American was so anxious to hear and see all that he yet clung to the raft.

The blacks made reply to Martel abjectly in broken English. The villain continued:

"I'm going back arter the others. Now don't ye let that gal escape!"

With which Martel sprung into a canoe and pushed out into the current. He passed perilously near Stanley.

But fortunately he did not see him.

The sensations of the young American can be better imagined than described. He was in the captor's stronghold and almost in the presence of the prisoner. Why should he not succeed in the rescue?

Filled with thrilling hope and daring resolve, he dropped away from the raft and swam leisurely under the high banks.

He had been unseen.

Of this he felt sure.

He waited until the canoe in which was Martel, had passed from sight. As the canoe passed through the fire light once, Martel turned his face toward him and Stanley saw his face plainly.

It was of a coarse and cruel type. He wore a fierce mustache and imperial.

"Truly he looks the villain that he is reported to be," thought Stanley.

After the canoe had vanished the young American began to lay his plans for the accomplishing of his purpose.

He drew himself out of the water and peered over the edge of the bank.

The floor of the cavern here was dead level for a distance back into the gloom.

He saw the fire made of a peculiar kind of coal which is found in those mountains, and about it were grouped a hundred or more of the bushmen.

They were engaged in various occupations; but the sight which thrilled Stanley the most was just beyond the circle of firelight.

There, sitting upon a temporary couch or divan of skins, was a young girl, pallid and careworn in feature, yet transcendently beautiful.

"It is she," muttered Stanley with a thrill. "Merciful powers! She is divinely lovely. Her picture does not half do her justice!"

Mabel Harcourt was gazing despairingly into the gloom and exactly toward Stanley.

For a moment the young adventurer fancied that she must see him.

He was even tempted to arise and attempt to catch her glance. But second thought convinced him of the danger of this.

Risks he must not take.

He knew that these bushmen were the most watchful and treacherous of human beings.

It would be necessary for him to remain constantly upon his guard. This he proceeded to do.

But all the while he was busy formulating a plan for the rescue.

He considered the idea of bringing one of the canoes down under the bank where he could readily get into it.

Then he watched for an opportunity to let Mabel know of his presence. Fortune favored him.

He succeeded in getting the canoe and then returned to the bank. To his joy he found that the bushmen had in a body retired into the cave, leaving only two of their number with the girl.

One of these was busy on the raft. The other sat not far from her, engaged in gnawing a bone like a hungry dog.

With the utmost care Stanley now began to creep towards the fire. The bushman's back was turned to him.

He trusted to fortune that the fellow on the raft should not see him.

But just at that moment Mabel turned her gaze upon him.

It was a critical moment.

For an instant her lips parted as if to emit a cry of great joy. Then her face regained its mobility and one finger was pressed to her lips.

It was a rare bit of sense upon her part, and showed great self-command.

As for Stanley, he stood like one in a spell, looking at her.

Her transcendent beauty for a moment held him spellbound. But the critical nature of the situation brought him to himself.

He made a swift gesture to her and then crept on.

But it was impossible to evade the keen sense of intuition possessed by the bushman. Suddenly he whirled like a flash and confronted Stanley.

For a moment the two deadly foes stood facing each other thus.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTURE OF MARTEL.

FRANK READE, JR., was astounded at sight of the strange beast which had appeared from the Australian bush.

"Be me sowl!" cried Barney, wildly. "Did yez iver see the loikes?" As for Pomp, he stood with mouth agape.

It was a giant creature truly, and in build resembled very much the giraffe of Africa.

Fully twenty feet in height, it towered above the adventurers like a veritable Jumbo of its species.

It seemed to be a herbivorous animal, feeding upon the tree tops, and Frank saw at once that it doubtless was a rare specimen of a species supposed by zoologists to be for centuries extinct.

"Be me sowl, it's a mollygobbler!" screamed Barney, spring to the lever. "Sure, it'll ate us all up."

"Hold on!" cried Frank. "Don't start the machine yet."

Frank believed that they were at a sufficient distance from the monster to be safe. Moreover he was desirous of scrutinizing the strange animal.

It remained in its first position at sight of the Buckboard and seemed to regard the machine in surprise and not a little of alarm.

Frank studied the creature a moment. Then he picked up his rifle.

"Let us try a shot at it," he cried, and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The beast threw up its head and emitted a loud roar. Then without further comment it turned and incontinently fled.

Frank sprung to the lever and sent the machine after it.

Truly, this was rare sport—hunting animals of a prehistoric age, and long ago supposed to be extinct.

But the machine was barred by the density of the brush. The giant beast made good its escape to Frank's keen regret.

"That is too bad!" he cried. "I would much have liked to know what manner of creature it was."

"Begorra, I've seen sich a thing in me dreams!" exploded Barney, "but sure I've never seen the loikes awake!"

"Golly, I done fink if dat old chap should a-bit dis yer Buckboard with his feet, he'd hab sent us chilluns to kingdom come!" averred Pomp.

"No doubt of that," said Frank, with a laugh, "but such creatures generally do not have the courage."

The Buckboard now followed along the base of the hills for a ways. Suddenly Frank saw the glimmer of water just ahead.

"That's queer," he muttered. "If it is a stream, where can it come from?"

He quickened speed, and very soon the mystery was solved.

The Buckboard came out of a deep growth of bush, and was brought to a stop upon the banks of a wide and deep creek or small river.

What was more, this stream flowed out of a high arched cavern in the mountain wall.

Frank understood the case at once.

"This is the same stream which flows through the inner valley!" he cried. "I understand it now!"

"Begorra, mebbe the spalpeens escaped be this same way," cried Barney.

The same thought had occurred to Frank.

"Perhaps so!" he agreed.

Then he opened the curtain of the Buckboard and stepped out. He went down to the river's edge.

Here he could look up into the cavern for some ways to where it took a bend.

The water surged down through it quite rapidly. But now Frank was rewarded with a startling discovery.

This was in the shape of a number of footprints in the sand by the water's edge.

They were quite distinct and plainly the footprints of the natives.

"Ah," he muttered, "they made a landing here. That explains much."

He examined the footprints attentively. Then he looked again into the cavern.

He was given a mighty start of surprise.

Around the bend in the cavern there had shot into view a small raft. Upon it were four men.

Three of them were blacks and one was a white man.

An instant comprehension of the truth flashed upon Frank. He sprang back with a sharp cry.

The men on the raft had not seen him. He rushed back to the machine.

"Run her into the bush, Barney," he cried. "Get her out of sight. We have a golden opportunity to bag our game."

"Shure, sor," cried the astonished Celt, "phwat is it?"

"Never mind. Do as I tell you and then come down here with your rifle."

Barney at once obeyed.

A moment later he was with Frank by the riverside.

Then the young inventor explained the situation.

"I believe it is Martel!" he cried. "If we could only capture him I am sure that we can secure the captive girl."

"Shure, sor, we'll do it!" cried Barney.

So the two watchers crouched down in the bush and waited for the raft to appear.

Very soon it shot out of the cavern. The four occupants poled it to the shore. Then the white man sprang out upon the bank.

As he stood there a tall, powerful man, with hard, cruel features, Frank recognized him from description as Martel.

The young inventor gazed somewhat curiously at the villain. Truly, he was a perfect type of the brute.

Upon springing ashore, Martel reined a shower of curses upon the blacks and cried:

"Go on down to the sand bar. Wait for me there. I will stop here!"

The three bush natives obeyed. The raft went on down with the current.

Martel watched them until a bend in the river hid them from sight. Then he turned.

But as he did so it was to come face to face with Frank Reade, Jr. It was a tableau.

Frank held a revolver carelessly in his hand, and Barney stood at his shoulder. Martel turned livid.

"The devil!" he gasped.

"The devil is not here," said Frank, coolly, "but no doubt he will claim you some day."

A hiss escaped the villain's lips. His form quivered as if for a spring, but Frank coolly brought the revolver up on a level with his heart.

"Hands up!"

Martel hesitated.

The revolver hammer clicked ominously. Slowly the villain obeyed. A deadly light of baffled hatred shone in his eyes.

"Who the devil are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr."

"Curses!"

"The tables are turned, my friend. It looks as if you were in my power."

"Bah! with a snap of my fingers I can bring a hundred men here in a moment."

"And with the slightest pressure of my finger!" declared Frank. "I can blow you into eternity."

"Will you do it?"

"No."

"Why do you spare my life? I would not spare yours."

"I have a purpose!"

"What is it?"

"I want the release of the girl whom you hold captive."

"Perdition! I will never give it."

"Then you will die!"

Frank's eye glanced along the barrel. But he did not fire. In spite of his bravado the villain cowered.

"Well!" he gritted, finally, "how can I compromise? You must pay me some ransom."

"Not a cent!"

"Well, all right. I will accept the terms."

"Good! produce the girl!"

The villain took a step backward.

"Where are you going?"

"To get the girl."

Frank laughed sardonically.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You would not return."

"Won't ye take my word?"

"Not for a cent!"

"Well, then," growled the wretch, "What are ye going to do about it? I can't do nuthin' else."

"Yes, you can."

"What?"

"Recall one of your minions and send him after her. When you deliver her safe and sound into our hands, life and liberty are yours. Not until then!"

Martel indulged in a storm of curses. He obstinately refused to accede to this demand.

"Barney!" said Frank, coolly. "Put the manacles on him!"

Barney advanced with a pair of handcuffs in his hands.

It was but a moment's work to secure the villain's wrists.

"Now," said Frank, coolly, "we'll take you aboard the machine."

Martel made no resistance now; but there was a leering, furtive expression in his eyes.

Very soon all were on board the Buckboard. The villain was placed in the rear compartment. Frank went forward to the battery.

He had decided upon a prompt move.

He knew that only the most extreme of measures would compel Martel to come to terms.

"I'll break his temper," chuckled the young inventor.

He drew a coil of wire from a locker and connected it with a disc. He donned some insulated gloves, and then connected the wire with the dynamos.

Back to the machine's rear compartment he went. Barney stripped the feet of the villain.

"Martel," said Frank, sternly, "I am going to take severe measures with you. Once again, will you give up the girl?"

"Not unless ye trust to my word to fetch her," gritted the villain.

Frank said no more.

He applied the disc to the villain's feet.

The effect was thrilling. A loud yell of agony pealed from his lips. Again and again Frank applied the disc.

But it was not until the sixth trial that Martel gave in. Then he was like a whipped cur.

"I give in!" he gritted. "Let up! I'll do what you say."

"Good for you!" said Frank grimly. "The sooner you do it the better."

Martel took a whistle from his pocket. Again and again he sent shrill blasts upon the air.

Soon a distant answer came back.

Five—ten minutes elapsed. Then a number of blacks appeared upon the banks of the stream.

Martel called one of them to the machine and gave him orders.

The native quickly departed.

It looked like a victory for Frank Reade, Jr., and the Electric Buckboard.

CHAPTER XII.

STANLEY AND MABEL ESCAPE.

BUT Frank had not yet done with the villain.

"Martel," he said, sternly, "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you tell me the truth."

"Well?" replied the fellow, sullenly.

"Have you another prisoner?"

Martel looked surprised.

"No," he replied.

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Of course I am!"

"One of our party, a young man named Stanley Martin, disappeared last night. Can you tell me whether he was captured or killed?"

Martel's face lit up.

"Oh, I remember!" he cried. "Wall, I reckoned he was drowned."

"Drowned?"

"Yes. My men chased him inter ther creek. He went down, but didn't come up."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yas."

Frank turned aside to hide his emotion. It was terrible to think of. "Poor Stanley is gone!" he muttered. "His parents will be heart broken!"

Barney and Pomp were deeply affected by the report. Stanley was much liked by all.

Time went by. It seemed an age before the reply came to the message sent by Martel.

Then a distant whistle was heard.

"There he is!" cried the villain.

He answered the whistle. A short while later the same black who had gone upon the errand, appeared in the clearing by the river.

He approached the machine rapidly.

"Well," growled Martel, "whar's the girl?"

The black was alone. He made a gesture of dismay.

"She gone!" he said, in rude English.

"Gone!" roared Martel. "What do you mean?"

The black then explained that she had been stolen away by some one in their absence; that she was out of their hands.

The fury of Martel knew no bounds. He raved like a madman, and stormed furiously about the vicinity as well as he could, with his hands manacled.

But he was not any more astonished than was Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor was puzzled.

What did it mean?

Who had rescued Mabel? Then like a revelation the thrilling thought came to him. Was it Martin?

Had he escaped and accomplished the grandest of acts? Frank was willing to believe it.

"He is certainly a hero," he muttered, "if he has done that thing. But where are they now?"

"Wall," said Martel, turning to Frank, "what are you goin' to do about it? The girl ain't in my hands."

"I shall wait until she is found," replied Frank.

"But ye ain't going to keep me prisoner, are ye?"

"Why, certainly."

"But hang it, it's a great damage to me. I must get away from here."

"I don't know any good reason why I should respect your feelings in the matter," said Frank. "If I were in your power I should expect scant mercy. I do not intend to use you unjustly."

"Curse ye! I'll come square with ye if I have ter rise from the dead to do it!" raved the villain.

Frank had now decided to leave the spot.

He had in a measure guessed at the likeliest course pursued by Martin.

If he had drifted down the river into the cavern, very likely, after rescuing Mabel he had kept on and emerged at this very spot.

In that event he was very likely far down the stream somewhere.

Therefore Frank decided to follow on down through the plain.

So he shut down the curtains with a snap, leaving Martel in the rear compartment.

The Buckboard started upon its course, but at that moment a shower of poisoned darts came rattling against the curtains.

Of course no harm was done.

But glancing back through a loophole Frank saw a legion of the wretches swarming into the open.

But the Buckboard soon left them in the rear.

Straight on down the course of the little stream went the machine at full speed.

Let us return to the cavern and to brave Stanley Martin whom we left face to face with the bushman who was guarding the captive girl.

The situation was a thrilling one and to a man possessed of less coolness of nerve, it would have been serious indeed.

But Stanley acted with great promptness and courage.

The bushman's lips were parted to give the yell of warning and his hand was upon his dagger.

But swifter than thought Stanley sprang forward. He had no weapon of any kind but his fist came in contact with the bushman's skull.

The fellow went down as if kicked by a horse. Not a whimper escaped his lips so timely was the blow.

Then Stanley with both hands extended sprang toward the captive girl.

For the first time their glances met. Was it intuition or a natural attraction that instinctively drew each toward the other. The magnet of love at first sight seemed to here have found verification. Neither ever forgot the sensation of that first meeting.

"Courage, Miss Harcourt. I am here to rescue you," said Stanley, in thrilling tones. "I am Stanley Martin, a stranger but a friend."

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed Mabel, fulsomely. "I have prayed for this, and my supplication has found answer."

"You are strong?"

"Yes!"

"Then come with me. We have no time to lose. I fear—ah!"

At that moment the bushman on the raft turned his head that way. The result was exciting.

The fellow sent up a yell that made the arches of the cavern ring. For a moment Stanley's blood seemed freezing in his veins.

But he quickly recovered. He dragged rather than led Mabel across the cavern to the bank of the stream.

The bushman had seized his blow pipe and sent a poison dart at Stanley.

It struck him full and fair in the side.

Had it not been for the armor that moment would have been his last. He instinctively realized the risk of the situation for his fair companion.

Should one of the deadly darts hit her—he shut his teeth together with a snap and picked her up bodily in his arms.

Down the bank he sprang.

"Lie down in the canoe!" he cried. "You must not be struck by those darts."

"But you!" she asked, with a light of fear in her eyes.

"I am protected. I wear a suit of armor."

Out into the pool shot the canoe. Stanley bent to the paddle.

The bushmen came in hot pursuit. The answering cries of the others could be heard.

There was no time to lose.

The blacks' canoe came swiftly after Stanley. The latter saw that a collision was imminent. He was hardly prepared for a fight at close quarters.

Oh, for a pistol that he might check the career of the fellow at once! He did not fear for himself but for his fair charge.

Lustily Stanley bent to the paddle. Mabel crouched low in the light craft.

But now the firelight began to die out and they plunged into the murky darkness of the subterranean cavern.

Swift rapids caught the light craft and carried it at rapid speed down the stream. This was the last that Stanley saw of his pursuer.

After a time the young New Yorker became satisfied that he had distanced him. For a long time both sat in silence in the canoe.

They finally began to talk. Stanley described how he had chanced to become her rescuer, told her of the electric Buckboard and of Frank Reade, Jr.

She listened with deepest interest.

"Oh, you Americans are wonderful people!" she cried.

Then she told of her adventures and her persecution by her captors. But from the first she had clung to the belief that she would be rescued.

Thus chatting time passed rapidly to the two young people. They were suddenly aroused, however, by an unlooked for happening.

The canoe suddenly struck an obstacle and stopped. Stanley put his hand over the gunwale and felt that they had grounded upon a rock.

Then he drew a match from his pocket and lit it. By its transient light he saw that they were at a junction where the creek divided its waters.

Which way should they go?

Stanley dislodged the canoe and chose the left hand course. He little knew at the moment that by so doing he had saved their lives.

For far down the right hand passage was another underground rendezvous of the bushmen. And there they would have encountered Martel.

It was not long now before the light canoe came out into the open air. It was the break of day.

Stanley allowed the canoe to drift on down the stream for some miles. Then reckoning that there were beyond pursuit, he ventured to go ashore.

He made a fire by which to dry their damp clothing. Two hours later Stanley said:

"Really, I am in a quandary. Which direction shall we take? We cannot safely remain here."

"Home is to the westward," said Mabel. "I think if we were to make a detour by yonder spur of the mountains we may find a pass by which to reach the bush plain beyond."

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Stanley, with perturbation, "you can never stand it to walk thither!"

"Oh, yes I can!"

"You had better let me find a safe hiding place for you. Then I will go on and hunt up my friends and the machine."

"Oh, I am strong!" she cried, lightly. "Girls in Australia are trained to walk long distances. Do not fear for me."

So they set forth.

Mabel proved as good as her word. For some hours they kept on.

Then suddenly a distant welcome sound was heard. It was a rumble which Stanley knew was caused by the wheels of the Buckboard. He sent up a shout, which was instantly answered by a rifle shot.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

THE next moment the Buckboard came in sight. It was indeed a fortunate chance which had brought them to this spot so opportunely.

Frank had followed the stream down until the canoe and the footprints of the fugitives were found.

The rest was easy.

The greeting was a warm one. They were quickly on board the machine. Martel now clamored for his release.

"No," replied Frank. "I am not under obligations to release you now, as the prisoner was rescued."

"But what are ye going to do with me?" asked the villain, in dismay.

"I am going to deliver you up to Governor Archibald at Keats."

"But they'll hang me!"

"Do you not deserve it?"

In vain the wretch pleaded. Frank was as good as his word. When the Buckboard reached Keats a general ovation was given them.

The rescue of Mabel Harcourt made Leonard Harcourt nigh insane with joy.

The capture of Martel was an achievement of which too much could not be said. Frank Reade, Jr., became a hero.

For several days the Buckboard remained in Keats. The occasion was a continuous fete for the travelers.

Then the Buckboard went on its projected trip across Arnhem Land.

A book could be written upon the experiences of the party. But as this story has to do only with the rescue of Mabel Harcourt, we will not attempt to follow them.

In due course of time, after the wild region had been pretty well explored, the Buckboard returned to Keats.

Captain Benton with the Raven had put in there for a day upon a return trip to Java.

The Buckboard was therefore once more packed in sections for transportation home.

All were sun-burned and hardened by the experience under the Australian sun. Their spirits were high.

But when the hour for sailing came Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp were given a great surprise.

A great crowd had gathered at the wharf to see them off. The governor was there, and Mr. Harcourt with Mabel.

Stanley Martin stood with the Harcourts. Just as the plank was about to be drawn, Frank cried:

"Hello, Stanley! Hurry up, or you'll be left!"

"That is all right, Mr. Reade," replied the young American, with a twinkle in his eye.

Frank was astonished.

"What?" he exclaimed. "You are not going to remain behind?"

"That is just it."

"But—how is that?" exclaimed the astonished young inventor.

"What is it for I'd like to know—Ah!"

Frank saw the tell-tale color upon Mabel Harcourt's face. He was, indeed, obtuse not to see the point.

He simply advanced, and said, mock seriously with extended hands: "My blessings go with you. May you always be happy!"

The crowd caught onto the situation and cheered wildly. Then the steamer swung out of the dock, the Buckboard and its travelers were homeward bound.

Frank received pleasant letters from Stanley after arriving safely home in Readestown.

A short while later Stanley and Mabel were married. They are coming to America before many days and will surely visit Readestown.

Leon Martel paid the penalty of his crimes on the scaffold.

Barney and Pomp went back to their duties around the shop. But Frank Reade, Jr., indefatigable as ever, at once began work upon a new invention, which we may introduce to the reader in a future story. And this brings to a propitious end our story.

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